



**Creating Opportunities For
Independent Living And Work**

**FY2018 Comprehensive Statewide Vocational
Rehabilitation Consumer Needs Assessment
Executive Summary**

**Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission
Research, Development, and Performance Management Department**

**In collaboration with:
Statewide Rehabilitation Council
Needs Assessment Committee**

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Executive Summary:

The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) in conjunction with the Statewide Rehabilitation Council (SRC) conducted its annual Comprehensive Statewide VR Consumer Needs Assessment (CSNA) in late fall 2017 and early 2018. The Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) requires the MRC to conduct a Comprehensive Statewide VR Consumer Needs Assessment at least every three years, but the MRC administers it on an annual basis with the information and findings incorporated into the MRC's section of the Massachusetts WIOA Combined State Plan, as well as in MRC's Strategic Planning, and Quality Assurance activities. The findings on consumer needs listed in this report are presented and shared with MRC Senior Management and VR staff, the entire body of the SRC, and other key stakeholders as part of the MRC's State Plan and continuous quality improvement processes. It is also publicly distributed via the MRC website. The FY2018 CSNA process constituted a number of areas, including: a consumer satisfaction survey which also included additional content for students with disabilities on pre-employment transition services; consumer focus groups; analysis of key statistical and demographic information and facts; findings from other reports and surveys including the Consumer, Provider, and Counselor Satisfaction surveys; youth and employer surveys; and collaboration and discussion with the SRC and other key stakeholders.

The MRC 2018 Comprehensive Statewide VR Consumer Needs Assessment Survey was administered electronically via Survey Monkey in September and October 2017. A focus group of MRC consumers was also conducted at the Consumer Conference in June 2017. A total of 2,002 consumers responded to the Needs Assessment survey, for a response rate of 22.4%, comparable to past Needs Assessment surveys. The number of responses to the survey exceeded the amount required to make statistically significant conclusions at the 99% confidence level according to the Raosoft.com Sample Size Calculator by 1,356 responses. There was a margin of error of approximately 2.1%. The number of responding consumers increased by 400 or 23.6% from last year, and the number of consumers who were offered the opportunity to participate increased by 23.5% from last year. This marked the eighth straight year of increases in both the number of consumers responding and the number given the opportunity to respond to the survey. 193 consumers aged 14 to 22 also responded to the separate survey questions sent out related to pre-employment transition service needs, which included additional questions on pre-

employment transition services and other transition related questions, comparable to the prior year's response rate.

The main findings of the FY2018 Comprehensive Statewide VR Consumer Needs Assessment can be summarized as follows:

1. The FY2018 CSNA confirms that the majority of consumers served by the MRC are people with the most significant disabilities. The findings indicate that a majority of MRC consumers require multiple Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services and supports to assist them in their efforts to prepare for, choose, obtain, maintain, and advance in competitive employment. There is also a high need for transportation and Community Living (CL) services amongst many consumers. The need for multiple VR services was found to be slightly greater amongst individuals of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds (particularly African-Americans and Hispanics) and for individuals with cognitive or psychological disabilities. This finding was consistent with the 2016 report but more pronounced than other past years. The findings suggest that many consumers also require supported employment and ongoing and extended employment supports. The need for multiple CL services was greatest among individuals with physical or sensory disabilities. (See page 161 for a key to disability groupings).
2. Overall, the majority of MRC consumers believe MRC services are addressing all or most of their needs and are satisfied with MRC services. 80% of consumers feel MRC services are at least somewhat effective in meeting their vocational service needs. 88% of MRC consumers are satisfied with the services they receive. Also, the majority of consumers (79%) are also somewhat or very satisfied with the development of their Individualized Plan for Employment. The satisfaction rate increased from 2016 while the proportion of those feeling services are meeting their needs and satisfaction with IPE development decreased slightly from the prior year. Many of those who feel MRC services are not meeting their needs indicate they have difficulty maintaining contact with their counselor, have experienced changes in their assigned counselors due to high levels of staff turnover, feel they have not been provided consistent or adequate information on services, or are struggling with health issues, financial issues, and other difficulties.
3. Many consumers expressed strong praise and gratitude for the hard work and support provided by the MRC and its counseling staff. It is very evident that MRC and its staff make a significant positive impact on the lives of many of its consumers. The level of positive feedback from consumers this year is once again exceptionally notable. A need raised by consumers included better contact with their

counselor and more information about available services and MRC procedures, including information and referral to other agencies. It also appears some consumers may not have a complete understanding of what the MRC can and cannot do for them. Many consumers also appear to be struggling with the high cost of living in Massachusetts and the competitive nature of the job market.

4. The most important and needed VR services listed by consumers were job placement (88%), career counseling (86%), supported employment (84%), benefits planning (82%), work-readiness training (73%), ongoing supports to assist in retaining employment (73%), assistance with college education (71%), and On-the-Job Training and Job-Driven Trainings (70%), and vocational training (69%).
5. Among individuals with less than a high school education at application, 92% indicate that transition services to assist in transitioning from high school to college and employment are important and 93% find pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities as important service needs. Obtaining a high school diploma and college education were also rated as important services by youth.
6. The most important and needed pre-employment transition services listed by MRC consumers of transition age (14 through 21- up to their 22nd birthday) included internships/work-based learning experiences (92%), followed by learning about education/jobs/careers (job exploration counseling) (88.7%), transitioning from high school to college/work (86.7%), assistance with college education (85.2%), work-readiness training (85.1%), and college/career counseling (81.5%) and mentorship/peer counseling/self-advocacy (81%). 74% of consumers of transition age indicate they have received some pre-employment transition services from MRC. Some consumers report they receive pre-employment transition services from schools outside of MRC, the frequency of the responses range from 17% for advocacy/peer counseling to 49% for work-based learning experiences.
7. The majority of transition age consumers indicate they are satisfied with pre-employment transition services provided by MRC and their partners in meeting their needs towards future education and employment (71% satisfied/very satisfied, and 91% somewhat satisfied/satisfied/very satisfied), and the majority who are receiving these services (72%) indicate these services are effective in preparing them for their future career.
8. Overall, results throughout the CSNA demonstrate a significant need for pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) among high school students with disabilities and youth consumers of transition age and MRC is working to address this need through its various transition and Pre-ETS initiatives. MRC continues to develop strategies to work more closely with local school districts on transition and Pre-ETS services, including coordinating services with those provided under the Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). MRC has a counselor assigned to every public high school in the Commonwealth, has developed strong working relationships with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), and has a Transition Manager to oversee transition and coordination with educational authorities. MRC is also in its second year of a 5 year demonstration grant on work-based learning experiences by RSA for students with disabilities entitled Transition Pathway Services which will also assist with needs in this area. This grant continues to ramp up and will be used to develop additional best practices in this area. MRC is also working on expanding its service offerings to students who are potentially eligible for VR services in addition to those who are VR eligible in collaboration with vendors and school districts and to expand work-based learning to include job tours, job shadowing, volunteering, and other work-based learning areas based on RSA and WINTAC guidance.

9. To assist in determining the statewide need for pre-employment transition services, MRC analyzed statewide data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) (http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/selectedpopulations.aspx). According to DESE data, there are 171,061 students with disabilities enrolled in public high schools in Massachusetts as of October 1, 2017, all who may be potentially eligible for VR services and/or who may benefit from Pre-ETS services. Based on this data and the high need for Pre-ETS services demonstrated throughout the CSNA as described above, MRC forecasts that its entire 15% reservation of VR funding set aside to provide Pre-ETS services as required under WIOA is necessary (approximately \$6.2 million) to provide the five required Pre-ETS services to students with disabilities (work-based learning experiences, job exploration counseling, counseling on opportunities for enrollment in post-secondary education and other comprehensive training programs, workplace readiness training, and instruction in self-advocacy). MRC forecasts that due to the fact that the entire set-aside is required, that no funding will remain to provide authorized pre-employment transition services beyond the five required services due to the high need for Pre-ETS services as demonstrated in this year's CSNA findings and the DESE data. See page 74 for details on MRC's fiscal forecasting process for Pre-ETS.
10. The most important job characteristics that MRC consumers indicated they are looking for in a job include a friendly job environment (96%), job satisfaction and personal interests (95%), earning a living wage (95%), an adequate number of hours worked per week (94%), vacation and other leave benefits (90%), promotional opportunities (88%), and health insurance benefits (84%).

11. The most common occupational areas of interest listed by MRC consumers included Community/Social/Human Services (34%), Health Care (29%), Administrative (29%), Self-Employment (26%), Customer Service (25%), Arts/Entertainment (24%), Computers/Information Technology (21%), and Education/Childcare (17%). All but Self-Employment are amongst the top 10 occupational goals by Standard Occupational Code (SOC) in consumer employment plans in the MRCIS Case Management System. A number of consumers also asked for additional information on self-employment supports.
12. Only 27% of consumers indicated that they are aware of the Independent Living Center in their area. Individuals with psychological disabilities, younger consumers, and those in the South and North District tended to be less aware of ILCs compared to consumers with other types of disabilities.
13. Transportation continues to be an area of need for some MRC consumers. The most important and needed transportation services and options listed by consumers are the Donated Vehicle Program (18%), driver's education and training (15%), public transportation (14%), Taxi/Uber/Lyft (11%), information on transportation options (10%), the Transportation Access Pass (9%), The Ride/paratransit (9%), and car pool/ride sharing (6%).
14. Transportation can serve as a barrier to some consumers and 35% of consumers find transportation to be a potential barrier to obtaining employment (up 2% from 2016 but steady on a 4 year trend line). Common reasons for how transportation is a barrier include the distance to and location of available jobs, inability to access jobs in areas without transportation, the cost of transportation, that consumers must rely on others for transportation, lack of a vehicle and/or driver's license, and health conditions or the nature of disability, and the reliability and the time required to travel via public transit/paratransit.
15. The most important and needed Community Living services indicated by responding consumers were affordable, accessible housing and the Mass Access Housing Registry (64%), Social/Recreational opportunities (53%), Medicaid waiver services (43%), Assistive Technology (36%), Home Care Services (35%), Adult Supported Living (33%), and Home Modification (31%).
16. When factoring out consumers who indicated they do not require Community Living services, 89% of MRC consumers indicated that MRC's services were somewhat or extremely useful in assisting them to maintain independence in the community. As with the section on VR, many consumers reflected on how the MRC's assistance has been tremendously valuable. Many consumers, however, were not aware of some or all of the CL services provided by the MRC. Others indicated they do not require

CL services. There appears to be a higher need for CL services amongst women and minority consumers.

17. Finding affordable and accessible housing continues to remain a challenge for many consumers due to the high cost of living in Massachusetts. The Independent Living Centers may be able to assist consumers in this area, and counselors may be able to refer consumers to other resources to assist with housing needs.
18. A total of 17% of consumers feel they require additional services and supports. This number decreased about 2% from 2016. These services include job search assistance, job placement and job training, financial assistance, transportation, affordable and accessible housing, counseling and guidance, information on available services, assistive technology, education and training, services from IL centers, and services and supports from other agencies, and computer/technology skills training.
19. The most important single service consumers are receiving includes job placement and job search services, assistance with college education and job training, tuition waivers, vocational counseling and guidance, assistive technology, job readiness training, assistance with obtaining supplies for school and work, ongoing employment supports, job trainings, and transportation,
20. A majority of MRC counselors and supervisors (78% Satisfied/Very Satisfied) are satisfied with their ability to assist individuals with disabilities in obtaining, maintaining, and advancing in competitive employment based on their skills, interests, needs, and choices. This satisfaction rate is down slightly from 2016%. The majority of MRC counselors are generally satisfied with most services provided to consumers, including internal job placement services, services from Community Rehabilitation Providers, and education and training provided to consumers by schools and colleges. One area of improvement identified by counselors was the need to improve communication with both consumers and providers. Counselors identified areas that would assist them in doing their job better, such as improved support and resources for job placement, more full time job placement specialists, increased information on job leads for consumers, additional on-the-job training and other training resources, continued enhancements to the MRCIS system, more resources for vocational assessment and vocational training for consumers, and training on policies, procedures, and pre-employment transition services, amongst others.
21. Most consumers appear to be satisfied with services received from Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs). The majority of MRC staff also are somewhat or very satisfied with CRP services.

92% of CRPs indicated they are satisfied with services they provide to MRC consumers. Improved communication as well as information flow between CRPs and MRC staff may assist in improving service delivery to consumers and lead to more successful employment outcomes. Some CRPs have asked for MRC to provide additional information on client referrals for CRP services. Recent vendor expansion undertaken appears to have addressed CRP capacity needs, but there still may be a need for additional capacity in specific geographic areas, client population focus areas, and in particular service areas such as assessment based on counselor and provider feedback. MRC is also using CRPs to roll out new procurements to provide pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities. Feedback on these services from vendors will be incorporated in the FY2019 CSNA.

22. A survey of MRC employer partners through MRC's account management system and those employers participating in the MRC Annual Hiring Event indicate a very high level of satisfaction with MRC job placement services amongst employer partners (88% satisfied/very satisfied) including satisfaction with the job performance of employees hired through MRC (93% satisfied/very satisfied). Most responding employers indicated that MRC meets their recruitment needs and would recommend MRC to other businesses for employment and recruitment. These findings suggest that MRC's efforts to work with employers are effective towards accommodating the needs of our consumers and employer partners. It is recommended MRC expand these surveys to other employers.
23. There are areas where additional MRC staff training may assist in improving the quality and effectiveness of VR services delivered to consumers. Specific areas include trainings on the MRCIS system, as well as on VR best practices, policies, and procedures, strategies for maintaining communication with consumers and time management, internal controls, WIOA common measures and requirements, trainings on autism, and on pre-employment transition services and transition services under WIOA
24. The CSNA report indicates the need for multiple VR services was found to be slightly greater amongst individuals of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. For example, minority consumers were more likely to find obtaining a high school diploma, transition from school to work, on-the-job training, job-driven training, work-readiness/soft skills training, and vocational training as important and needed service. This finding was more pronounced than prior years. The need for college education supports and transportation services were also higher amongst consumers of minority ethnic and racial background compared to white consumers.

25. The MRC has again identified Asian and Pacific Islanders as being slightly underserved by the MRC's Vocational Rehabilitation program compared to their proportion in the overall state population. MRC continues to see growth in minority populations served by the MRC VR program in general. Growth in the Asian population continues to be seen in the state's general population while it has remained steady amongst the MRC population. It is recommended that the MRC continue its outreach efforts to Asian communities, however it did grow during FY2018. MRC has translated key agency marketing and information materials and recently completed a project to translate all MRCIS correspondence letters into several Asian languages common in Massachusetts including Mandarin Chinese, Vietnamese, and Khmer as part of its Language Access Plan. MRC will be conducting focus groups in two of its offices with higher concentrations of Asian consumers to gather further information on how MRC can better address the needs of this underserved population. MRC will also consult its Bilingual Committee and Diversity Committee as part of these efforts and also to develop appropriate training programs for staff.
26. In order to meet the needs of individuals served through other components of the Statewide Workforce Development System, MRC continues its efforts to collaborate with other core partners in the workforce investment system to reduce unemployment of individuals with disabilities and to provide effective services to employers throughout the state, to seek out collaborative opportunities including possible projects and grants that may assist individuals with disabilities across Massachusetts in obtaining competitive employment. MRC continues its efforts to work closely together on WIOA implementation including common performance measures, and is working with its partners to use Workforce Connect as a consumer-facing and staff facing dashboard and case management overlay to track shared consumers across the workforce system, among others. MRC participates in numerous workgroups such as the WIOA Steering Committee, WIOA Systems Integration Workgroup, and other committees who are working on the alignment of services under the workforce system.
27. MRC is increasing its collaboration with other core partners under WIOA to survey and further identify the needs of individuals working with other components of the Workforce system. Some of the identified needs include: interviewing skills, resume development, job specific skills (CVS Pharmacy Technician training, Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) Program, Advance Auto Parts, Lowes, Home Depot retail training, customer service jobs skills training, food service training, and human service training). MRC will continue to consult with core partners on the identified needs of

their consumers as it relates to accessibility and access to employment opportunities, employment training, and provide employer trainings on disability awareness and job accommodations. MRC is reaching out to its core partners as part of its next needs assessment to gather additional data on the needs of individuals in the overall workforce system to complement and further enhance the CSNA process going forward. MRC will be reaching out to its core partners in FY2019 to gather additional data on the needs of individuals in the overall workforce system to complement and enhance the CSNA.

28. The Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission VR Program has a growing presence at the Massachusetts Career Centers; the MRC Commissioner serves on the State Workforce Investment Board (SWIB), and each area director has a formal relationship with at least one career center. In addition, area directors or other MRC staff are on local workforce investment boards. MRC VR counseling staff make frequent visits and often conduct interviews at the local career centers and has leased space at all career centers to further increase MRC's presence. MRC has finalized its MOUs and infrastructure funding agreements with local areas and the Career Centers. Finally, the MRC's job placement specialists and other assigned MRC staff work closely with local career centers to provide high quality vocational rehabilitation services to persons with disabilities seeking expanded employment opportunities and MRC is providing assistance to career centers so they can best meet the needs of individuals with disabilities.

Conclusion, Recommendations, and Suggested Alternatives:

MRC's FY2018 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) consisted of a comprehensive process consisting of a web-based survey of active consumers which included additional questions on pre-employment transition services for consumers under age 22, a focus group, and analysis of key facts, trends, outcomes, demographics, analysis of staff training needs and findings from the Consumer Satisfaction Survey of closed consumers, a counselor survey, a vendor/provider survey, an employer survey, a staff survey on transition services, and a survey of schools on pre-employment transition services, among other key reports.

Through this analysis, the CSNA has identified the needs of individuals with disabilities in Massachusetts including the need for supported employment, the services of primary importance to active VR consumers, as well as the needs of the overall workforce investment system in the Commonwealth of

Massachusetts. MRC has also identified and evaluated the needs of youth with disabilities and students with disabilities, including their need for pre-employment transition services or other transition services, and the extent to which such services are coordinated with transition services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

The data and findings included here will be considered in agency policy on the development of new programs as well as changes to current programs to better serve consumers and individuals with disabilities. In addition, the CSNA is an integral part of MRC's Strategic Planning, State Planning, and overall quality assurance activities. Findings, recommendations, and strategies from the CSNA report will be incorporated into any required updates to MRC's section of the Vocational Rehabilitation portion of the Massachusetts WIOA Combined State Plan, MRC's Strategic Planning efforts, among others. The findings will be shared with MRC Senior Management, the Statewide Rehabilitation Council, VR staff, other key stakeholders, and will be disseminated through the MRC's website and with other core partners under the Massachusetts Workforce System. Findings will also be shared with MRC general staff.

The results of the FY2018 CSNA confirm that a majority of MRC consumers require multiple vocational rehabilitation services and supports to assist them in reaching their vocational and independent living goals. There is also a high need for transportation and Community Living (CL) services amongst many consumers. As with last year, there appears to be a higher need for some VR, transportation, and Community Living services amongst individuals of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds (particularly African-Americans and Hispanics) as well as among consumers with psychological or cognitive disabilities. For example, minority consumers were more likely to find obtaining a high school diploma, transition from school to work, on-the-job training, job-driven training, work-readiness/soft skills training, and vocational training as important and needed service. This finding was more pronounced than prior years. The need for college education supports and transportation services were also higher amongst consumers of minority ethnic and racial background compared to white consumers. This theme was consistent with last year but more pronounced than before 2015. The results also suggest many consumers require supported employment and ongoing and extended employment supports and a high need for transition services, including pre-employment transition services amongst youth and high school and post-secondary students with disabilities aged 14 to 22 in Massachusetts. The results also suggest

many individuals with disabilities in Massachusetts are significantly impacted by a highly competitive job market and the high cost of living in Massachusetts.

The following services were identified by MRC consumers as most important and needed services:

- Job placement
- Vocational/career counseling
- Pre-employment transition services for students with disabilities
- Supported employment
- Benefits planning
- Work readiness training
- Ongoing supports to assist to maintain employment
- Assistance with college education/tuition assistance
- On-the-job training and job driven training
- Job/vocational training
- Assistance with information on transportation and public transit
- Assistive technology – including home and vehicle modifications
- Donated Vehicle Program
- Driver's education
- Assistance or referrals to supports for affordable and accessible housing
- Information and referral to other supportive services from MRC's Community Living Division and other agencies and organizations

The CSNA also confirms that transition services for youth and high school students with disabilities are important and needed services. Results throughout the CSNA demonstrate a high need for these services, including pre-employment transition services among high school students with disabilities and youth consumers of transition age and MRC is working to address this need through its Pre-ETS and other transition-related initiatives.

MRC continues to develop strategies to work more closely with local school districts on transition and Pre-ETS service, including coordinating services with those provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) with local school districts. MRC has a counselor assigned to every public high school in the Commonwealth and continues to develop and maintain strong working relationships with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). MRC also has a Transition Manager who works to oversee the agency's statewide transition programs and coordination with educational authorities and other partners. MRC is also in its second year of a 5 year demonstration grant on work-based learning experiences by RSA for students with disabilities entitled Transition

Pathway Services which will also assist with needs in this area. This grant continues to ramp up and will be used to develop additional best practices in this area. MRC is also working on expanding its service offerings to students who are potentially eligible for VR services in addition to those who are VR eligible in collaboration with vendors and school districts and to expand work-based learning to include job tours, job shadowing, volunteering, and other work-based learning areas based on RSA and WINTAC guidance.

To assist in determining the statewide need for pre-employment transition services, MRC analyzed statewide data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) (See http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/state_report/selectedpopulations.aspx). According to DESE data, there are 171,061 students with disabilities enrolled in public high schools in Massachusetts as of October 1, 2017, all who may be potentially eligible for VR services and/or who may benefit from Pre-ETS services. Based on this data and the high need for Pre-ETS services demonstrated throughout the CSNA as described above, MRC forecasts that its entire 15% reservation of VR funding set aside to provide Pre-ETS services as required under WIOA is necessary (approximately \$6.2 million) to provide the five required Pre-ETS services to students with disabilities (work-based learning experiences, job exploration counseling, counseling on opportunities for enrollment in post-secondary education and other comprehensive training programs, workplace readiness training, and instruction in self-advocacy). MRC forecasts that due to the fact that the entire set-aside is required, that no funding will remain to provide authorized pre-employment transition services beyond the five required services due to the high need for Pre-ETS services as demonstrated in this year's CSNA findings and the DESE data. Please see page 74 for MRC's Fiscal Forecasting process in this area.

The majority of consumers indicate the MRC is providing services to them that are meeting their vocational needs and assisting them with maintaining their independence in the community; and the majority of consumers denoted that they are satisfied with the services they are receiving. There was an increase in satisfaction from the prior year but a slight decrease in the proportion of consumers indicating MRC is meeting their vocational needs. In addition, the vast majority of consumers also appear to be satisfied with the development of their Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE).

Many consumers expressed strong praise and gratitude for the hard work and support provided by MRC and its counseling staff. It is very evident that MRC and its staff make a significant positive impact on the

lives of many of its consumers. For the third straight year, the level of positive feedback in the survey in the comments was exceptionably notable. Many consumers indicated that MRC and its staff have assisted them tremendously through assistance going to school, college, or job training programs, providing interview preparation assistance, mock interviews, and job search assistance, referrals to training programs including on-the-job training and job-driven training programs, obtaining assistive devices such as hearing aids and vehicle modification, assistance with transportation, benefits planning, finding other services and supports, and receiving pre-employment transition services, among others. In addition, many consumers described how their counselor's counseling and guidance, overall positive attitude, and dedication to their work have been very beneficial to them in terms of staying motivated and on target to make progress toward their goals.

Results of the CSNA indicate that many MRC consumer consumers and individuals with disabilities overall have been affected by the competitive nature of the job market, health issues, and the high cost of living in Massachusetts. Once again, it is apparent that many consumers may also benefit from referrals to services provided by other agencies and organizations that may assist them in addressing some of these challenges.

Some areas for improvement identified by consumers included maintaining communication and regular contact with their counselor, improved communication with consumers impacted by staff turnover, more information about available services, more information about MRC procedures and policies, and information and referrals to other agencies and services.

It is also evident there may be a level of misunderstanding amongst some consumers over what the MRC can and cannot do for them. Additionally, some consumers may have a misunderstanding about the importance of their active contribution and involvement to the VR process to assist them in moving towards their goals. It also appears that MRC may benefit from developing a larger variety of job leads from its employer partners matching consumers' abilities and skills, and that MRC should continue to look into additional job driven trainings as well as options for consumers to receive computer and other technology skills training.

The results also suggest that long term consumers served over 10 years and consumers with higher levels of education, were more likely to indicate MRC as not currently meeting their VR needs compared to others. On the flip side, a higher proportion of minority consumers, especially African-Americans and Hispanics, felt MRC is meeting their needs.

As the Commonwealth's population continues to become more diverse, MRC continues to serve a higher number of consumers from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Over the past 10 years, MRC has seen an increase in African-American, Hispanic, and Asian consumers. There also has been a slight growth in Native American consumers as well. Through the CSNA process, the MRC again has identified Asian and Pacific Islanders as being slightly underserved by the MRC's Vocational Rehabilitation program compared to their proportion in the overall state population. African-Americans are served by the MRC at a much higher rate than their rate in the overall population. Hispanic consumers are served by MRC at a rate consistent with their rate in the general population. MRC continues to see numerical and proportional growth of minority populations, particularly among Hispanics. As growth in the Asian community continues to be seen in the state's general population, it is recommended that MRC continues its outreach efforts to Asian communities. There was growth in the number of Asian consumers served by MRC during FY2018 but it still remains below the proportion in the overall state population. MRC will be conducting a focus group of Asian consumers in the Lowell office during Fall 2018. Information from this focus group and additional consultation with MRC's Diversity Committee may yield information and suggestions on additional steps MRC can take in this area to further engage with the Asian community.

Overall, mental health, psychological, and cognitive disability impairments make up the largest proportion of MRC consumers. Psychiatric disabilities has remained the largest disability over the past decade. Over the past decade, there have been increases in consumers served with psychiatric disabilities (+2.7% since FY2013) and learning disabilities (+3% since FY2013), while there has been a slight decrease over the past decade in consumers with substance abuse issues (as a primary disability), traumatic brain injuries, developmental disabilities, and more recently individuals who are deaf/hard of hearing. The disability profile also varies significantly by MRC Area Office as demonstrated in Figure 46.

The majority of MRC counselors are satisfied with their ability to assist individuals with disabilities in obtaining competitive employment based on their skills, interests, needs, and choices. MRC counselors

are generally satisfied with most services provided to consumers, including internal job placement services, services from Community Rehabilitation Providers, and education and training provided to consumers by schools and colleges. Communication with consumers and providers was also identified by MRC counselors as an area for improvement. Counselors identified some areas that would assist them in doing their job better, including establishing dedicated transition caseloads and establishment of an eligibility unit, additional job driven training/on-the-job trainings, additional skills trainings for consumers, more resources for clerical assistance, additional resources for assessments, continued enhancements to the MRCIS system, information on available vendors to use for purchased services and materials, and additional resources for Pre-ETS. Improved support and resources for job placement, a greater variety of jobs and employers that MRC works with, and additional vendor capacity for VR services, among others.

Most consumers appear to be satisfied with services received from Community Rehabilitation Providers (CRPs). The majority of MRC staff also indicate that they are generally satisfied with CRP services. The operation of CRP programs through the Competitive Integrated Employment Services (CIES) and Pre-Employment Transition Services procurements appear to address many but not all consumer needs. There also appears to be some areas where additional CRP capacity may potentially be needed to cover certain geographic areas or specific populations and this should be examined closer by MRC. The addition of Pre-ETS services to potentially eligible students as part of MRC's procurements to provide pre-employment transition services, and the upcoming new RFR for the Competitive Integrated Employment Services (CIES) RFR for FY2020 is also an opportunity in this area. Finally, improved communication and information flow between CRPs and MRC staff, more information on consumer referrals, and continued efforts to streamline paperwork processing may assist in improving service delivery to consumers and lead to more successful employment outcomes.

The CSNA has also identified areas where additional MRC staff training may assist in improving the quality and effectiveness of VR services delivered to MRC consumers. MRC's training needs plan, workforce plan, counselors survey, and most recent case reviews, recommend continued trainings on transition services, pre-employment transition services and refresher training on WIOA requirements, job readiness/job placement activity trainings, labor market trainings, refresher training on the MRCIS case management system; trainings on VR best practices, and updated MRC policies and procedures, including

evidence-based best practices, and proper documentation of records, and refresher trainings on time management and how to effectively communicate with consumers. MRC continues to face high levels of staff turnover due to several recent early retirement packages and retirements are projected to continue at a high rate through the remainder of the decade into the early 2020s. MRC's workforce plan has assisted in alleviating the situation through recruitment of new staff through VR counseling graduate student interns and through manager, supervisor, and aspiring supervisor trainings and workshops to assist in preparing current staff to become future agency leaders.

In order to meet the needs of individuals served through other components of the Statewide Workforce Development System, MRC continues its efforts to collaborate with other core partners in the workforce investment system to reduce unemployment of individuals with disabilities and to provide effective services to employers throughout the state, to seek out collaborative opportunities including possible projects and grants that may assist individuals with disabilities across Massachusetts in obtaining competitive employment. MRC continues its efforts to work closely together on WIOA implementation including common performance measures, and is working with its partners to use Workforce Connect as a consumer-facing and staff-facing dashboard and case management overlay to track shared consumers across the workforce system, among others. MRC participates in numerous workgroups such as the WIOA Steering Committee, WIOA Systems Integration Workgroup, and other committees who are working on the alignment of services under the workforce system.

Actions Taken from the 2016 Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment Through MRC's State Plan and Strategic Planning Processes:

In the past year, the MRC has undertaken a number of steps to address the findings and suggested alternatives from the 2016 Needs Assessment (the prior year's report). These include the following:

1. Continued utilization of CSNA results to promote program development and planning, including integration into WIOA implementation, Combined State Plan, Strategic Plan, Performance Management and Quality Assurance initiatives:

MRC continues to utilize the CSNA, both its findings and recommendations to drive program development and planning. The CSNA has been integrated into MRC's performance management

and quality assurance activities. CSNA findings were incorporated into MRC's Strategic Plan and the VR section of the Massachusetts Combined State Plan including MRC's update to its section of the Combined State Plan in early 2018. MRC's revised section of this plan incorporated revised measurable goals and objectives based on the findings and recommendations from the CSNA. MRC has revised its strategic plan for FY2017-FY2019 and utilized CSNA findings to drive the process. MRC has also used CSNA findings to help plan for new programs and services as a result of WIOA including the Transition Pathway Services 5 year demonstration grant from RSA, and a grant from the Kessler Foundation entitled Career Pathway Services.

2. Continue efforts to enhance information to consumers and potential consumers on available services:

The MRC continues its efforts to provide updated and more consistent and comprehensive information on its services with the goal of providing consistent and improved information on available services. MRC has developed a new series of informational brochures, including those directed at youths and students with disabilities and their families, and continues to revise its consumer handbook for VR consumers as needed. As part of this effort, several videos were also created focused on youth and transition services. MRC has updated a uniform consumer orientation video for use by VR area offices and is working on a generic MRC informational video and a youth-centered video. With the help of the Needs Assessment Committee, MRC maintains a simple catalog listing of all available MRC services to be of assistance to consumers and staff. This has been published on the MRC website for dissemination to MRC consumers and staff. MRC also continues increased use of social media to convey information on the agency to consumers and the general public and has been developing new brochures and materials on pre-employment transition services, general transition services, and for the Transition Pathway Services grant. These will continue to be updated as MRC implements changes such as the implementation of Pre-Employment Transition Services to potentially eligible consumers, and other program enhancements designed to assist MRC consumers.

3. Focus on improving communication between consumers and counselors, including developing strategies to improve communication on caseloads where staff vacancies occur, and continue efforts to continue to increase utilization of electronic resources to communicate with consumers:

Findings from the Needs Assessment Survey, Counselor Survey, Satisfaction Survey, and other elements of the CSNA suggest that some consumers experience some difficulties staying in contact with their counselor and vice versa. This has been shared with senior management and VR staff and the agency is exploring ways to improve communication. MRC has taken steps to increase use of electronic communication through promoting the collection of email addresses in the MRCIS system and new capacity to email correspondence letters to consumers directly from the MRCIS system. The agency is also promoting the use of email-to-text message capacity to assist with communication as requested by staff and consumers. MRC has also established a workgroup to look at unsuccessful closures, as the most common reason for closure is lack of contact/communication with consumers, this workgroup will also look at improving communication between staff and consumers.

4. Efforts to increase collection of valid email addresses for VR consumers:

MRC continues to place an emphasis on the importance of collecting and updating valid consumer email addresses in the MRCIS Case Management System through mentions in trainings and meetings with managers. This focus continues to be effective, as the proportion of actively served consumers with an email address in the system continues to grow, increasing by 4% from 2016 and 14% from 2014. In early 2015, MRC rolled out an enhancement to allow correspondence letters to be emailed directly to consumers through MRCIS. This previously only could be done via regular mail. This enhancement has directly lead to further increases in email addresses in MRCIS. MRC also presents annually at new counselor training on the importance of collecting consumer email addresses and MRC extensively covered this topic at trainings on a new MRCIS release during 2017.

5. Extension of Donated Vehicle Program through SFY2019:

Based on the high demand and the demonstrated impact of the program, the MRC continues to operate the Donated Vehicle Program through Good News Garage, the program is currently funded through the end of PY2018/SFY2019 (June 30, 2019). MRC has a current RFR for the Donated Vehicle

Program and has a contract in place to cover services beyond June 2019 based on the availability of funding.

6. Collaboration with Independent Living Centers (ILCs):

MRC continues to work with the Independent Living Centers in Massachusetts in a number of ways. One way MRC works with the ILCs is to provide services to assist consumers transitioning from school to work through short-term vocationally oriented pre-employment transition services. Known as the Transitional Internship Program (TIP), the program is designed to assist young consumers with the transition from school to post-secondary education and employment through employment-related soft skills training, guidance, and paid summer internships with various employers. This program is part of MRC's WIOA pre-employment transition service effort. TIP is conducted by the ILCs in coordination with local schools and VR offices. The program currently operates with seven ILCs across the Commonwealth and is overseen by VR district contract supervisors.

MRC also continues its VR-IL contract program to provide employment-oriented services such as soft skills to VR consumers. This program moved to a unit rate structure under a new RFR in November 2017, and this has been used as an opportunity to revisit and improve services. MRC holds a regular workgroup with the ILCs in this area and has used the workgroup to improve the VR/IL program and address any issues or concerns in this area. MRC also operates two multi-million dollar procurements for the provision of pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities, of which several ILCs are providers under this program. Finally, MRC is partnering with 3 ILCs to provide peer mentoring supports to students served under MRC's new Transition Pathway Services federal demonstration grant program, and is partnering with 2 ILCs to provide peer supports to consumers through its Kessler Foundation-funded Career Pathway Services program. MRC continues to explore additional collaboration with the ILCs.

7. Efforts to improve services to youth consumers including high school and post-secondary students with disabilities, including pre-employment transition services for high school students with disabilities in coordination with local educational authorities:

MRC continues to work on numerous efforts to improve services to youth consumers and students with disabilities, including the provision of pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities. MRC's efforts in this area are spearheaded by MRC's Statewide Transition Director. MRC has developed a strong working relationship and has developed an agreement with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) on the provision of individualized transition services for students with disabilities that lead to successful post-school outcomes in competitive integrated employment, postsecondary education and training, and community living. An administrative memo to schools in this area is also being drafted and sent out to school districts as part of this effort.

MRC is also working closely with local school districts and DESE on coordinating transition and WIOA pre-employment transition services, including those provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). MRC and DESE recently conducted a survey of schools on pre-employment transition services and coordination of services with MRC which has been incorporated into this year's CSNA report. This will also be used to further strengthen connections with schools and to improve coordination of services and communication between schools and MRC.

MRC continues to operate a multi-million dollar procurement for the provision of pre-employment transition services provided by community-based providers and Independent Living Centers, continues to operate programs such as the Transitional Internship Program (TIP), the WIOA Family Support Project in collaboration with the Federation for Children with Special Needs, among other efforts to assist youths and students with disabilities in successful transition from school to post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. Additionally, MRC is also in the second year of a 5 year demonstration grant from RSA on Work-Based Learning Experiences for students with disabilities. Known as Transition Pathway Services, participating students have access to two paid work experiences, vocational counseling and career discovery, access to a pre-employment transition services, training through a community vendor, benefits counseling, travel training, assistive technology, industry-based job matching, peer mentoring, and family support transition planning, with an end goal of customized job placement. This project is operating out of the MRC Roxbury, Lawrence, and Springfield Offices and MRC is also partnering with 3 Independent Living Centers for peer mentoring supports, and with the Institute for Community Inclusion at UMass-Boston as an

evaluation and research partner as well as a technical support resource. One key element of the project is the Career Discovery Team, interagency teams that support each student to ensure a stronger transition plan for students that include school, community and state services.

MRC also continues to work to identify and promote best practices on transition, continuing collaboration with local schools and community colleges, and ensuring that information on pre-employment transition services and the transition planning process is available to consumers and their families. MRC is also involved in other youth-related projects including the B-SET project.

8. Continued expansion of services to employers and coordination: employer services with other core workforce partners

MRC's robust account management system is designed for us to hear first from employers regarding their specific labor market needs. MRC has several employer advisory boards strategically located across the Commonwealth through which we receive labor market information and to collaborate on strategies for hiring of people with disabilities. MRC's account management system involves numerous employers across the Commonwealth including those in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) occupations such as Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, Mass General Hospital, Partners Health Care, among others. MRC produces a labor market summary for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and analyzes placement and employment trends by Standard Occupational Code (SOC). MRC also tracks information on labor force participation and unemployment for people with disabilities in comparison to those without disabilities. MRC continues to strengthen agency use of labor market information and continues to strive to reduce the gap in labor force participation between people with and without disabilities. MRC will work with its workforce partners, including the Career Centers and Workforce Investment Boards to analyze labor market trends and statistics to identify job sectors to focus outreach efforts on. MRC also uses its Employer Advisory Board network and other marketing efforts such as advertisements on WBZ News Radio and utilization of materials developed with Buyer Advertising to promote MRC's employer services and the benefits of hiring people with disabilities.

Employer feedback has led MRC to operate an annual statewide hiring event to help address the needs of our consumers. MRC has regular local office briefings with employers on local labor needs. All of

these enhance the agency's knowledge on local and statewide labor market needs. MRC utilizes job matching tools such as ResuMate to assist with job matching efforts to accommodate the needs of our consumers and employer partners.

MRC participates in a business strategy workgroup between key workforce partners as part of the Commonwealth's effort to coordinate services to employers amongst partner agencies. MRC subscribes to the established key principles to guide business services amongst key partner agencies and will work closely with WIOA core partners to expand services to employers.

MRC is continuing to target new employers and expand its employer account management system. Examples include job driven training programs with multiple employers, such as the MRC Pharmacy Technician Training Program in direct partnership with CVS Health, among others. MRC also is an active member of the Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR)'s National Employment Team network, which strives to create a coordinated approach to serving business customers through a national VR team that specialized in employer development, business consulting and corporate relations.

MRC's Job Placement Unit operates an annual Federal Hiring Event in partnership with MCB, and other workforce partners, and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) to assist consumers with securing competitive employment comparable with their interests and abilities. MRC prepares consumers to interview for available jobs with employers participating in the event. This is a hiring event and focuses on direct job placement with participating employers and is not simply a career fair. Since 2013, Over 400 individuals have been employed through this annual one day event. MRC is looking to expand this model to other employers based on the success of the program.

9. Staff trainings efforts to assist in improving service delivery to VR consumers:

Once again, the CSNA has identified areas where additional MRC staff training may assist in improving the quality and effectiveness of VR services delivered to MRC consumers. These areas have been shared with the MRC training department and its advisory council and are incorporated into the upcoming year's training plan. MRC also developed a best practices manual for job placement to assist in improving job placement services and outcomes for MRC consumers. MRC is also

conducting trainings with the assistance of the WINTAC technical assistance center and will be conducting other important trainings.

10. Increase consumer awareness of transportation options and explore efforts to assist consumers with transportation:

The MRC Transition Pathway Services grant includes the employment of a transportation coordinator to provide travel training and transportation coordination to students participating in the TPS grant. The Coordinator is also working on transportation options which may benefit consumers served by the entire agency. The coordinator's efforts have led to an agreement between MRC and the MBTA and other RTAs that MRC consumers will now be considered automatically eligible for the Transportation Access Pass (TAP) program by virtue of working with MRC. Similar arrangements exist for clients of other state agencies such as DDS. This is a major accomplishment which will benefit many MRC consumers.

The MRC has also developed a series of fact sheets to assist consumers in better understanding some of the transportation options available to assist them. One describes recent revisions to eligibility and appeal processes for the MBTA's TheRide services. Another fact sheet discusses the process and procedure to obtain/apply for a Transportation Access Pass (TAP). Finally, a third fact sheet provides general resources and information on the various Regional Transportation Authorities (RTAs) throughout the state. The fact sheets have been completed and have been publicly posted on MRC's website and provided to the MRC Training Department. MRC has updated and refined its transportation fact sheets in early 2018 with the assistance of the transportation coordinator who is employed as part of the Transition Pathway Services Grant. MRC has staff who attended a disability-related mobility transportation conference which occurs annually and MRC plans to develop a fact sheet on the MBTA's Uber/Lyft Pilot Program and other ride sharing resources. MRC also works with the Executive Office of Health and Human Service Transportation office on transportation for consumers. MRC will continue to work with transportation agencies to explore other transportation options for consumers.

11. Outreach to communities of ethnic and diverse backgrounds on vocational rehabilitation and other MRC service offerings, especially in the Asian community:

The MRC has made a commitment to outreach to individuals with the most significant disabilities who are also ethnic and cultural minorities by hiring bilingual staff to outreach more effectively to those communities, through outreach to local community agencies and organizations, especially those that serve ethnic and cultural minorities, and other methods, including the Asian community.

MRC continues efforts to reach out to minority communities including the Asian community. A Language Access Plan has been developed based on information on language prevalence in the state overall and by county. As part of its plan, MRC materials and brochures have been shared with the bilingual staff committee and have been translated into multiple languages, including Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Khmer, Vietnamese, Russian, Portuguese, and Haitian Creole. MRC has been proactive in its translation to be able to meet the needs of its consumer population as only Spanish currently meets the 5% language threshold required by state regulation. All MRCIS correspondence letters are translated in the above languages. These have been made available to all staff and the long term goal is to incorporate these translated letter directly into the system through a system enhancement.

12. Continue to enhance methods and products to assist with job matching and providing additional job leads to consumers and counselors:

MRC has undertaken several efforts in this area including expanded use of the ResuMate software system to match consumer skills from resumes to required skills from job leads. MRC continues to expand the use of this software and is now using SOC codes to assist with job matching. MRC has also worked with Infor Talent Science to use its talent-science/job-matching software to identify individual interests, abilities, and needs, ensuring a successful employment fit. This program is used by employers to assess job fits and MRC is using the tool to help match consumers to employment opportunities. MRC also continues to promote as a best practice the team model used in some offices where the JPS, ESS, and the counselor work together as a team to assist consumers in obtaining employment as a best-practice model. This has also been found as an areas success in the MRC's Career Pathway Service project funded by a Kessler Foundation grant.

13. Continue to assist Community Rehabilitation Programs:

The MRC continues to collaborate with Community Rehabilitation Programs through its Competitive Integrated Employment Services (CIES) and its Pre-Employment Transition Service procurements, among other projects. The MRC also continues to conduct an annual survey of Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) as part of the CSNA process, to assess the need to improve these programs within Massachusetts and these findings are factored into the recommendations of the CSNA. MRC also conducted a comprehensive survey in early 2017 and again in early 2018 on services provided by CRPs to help improve collaboration with CRPs. MRC also brought on 13 new providers into its Pre-Employment Transition Service procurements in July 2017 based on the need for additional vendor capacity identified in the past three CSNA reports. MRC also continues regular meetings with the Statewide Providers Council and the Association for Developmental Disability Providers (ADDP), who both represent many CRPs who provide services to MRC consumers, to enhance and improve communication, address concerns, and assist in improving service delivery. MRC is in the process of amending its Pre-ETS RFRs to incorporate services to potentially eligible students aged 14 to 22. MRC also has begun the process to renew its CIES RFR and has sought input from vendors, counselors, partner agencies, the SRC, and other key stakeholders as part of this process.

14. Collaboration with the Statewide Workforce Investment System:

MRC continues its efforts to collaborate with other core partners in the workforce investment system to reduce unemployment of individuals with disabilities and to provide effective services to employers throughout the state, to seek out collaborative opportunities including possible projects and grants that may assist individuals with disabilities across Massachusetts in obtaining competitive employment. MRC continues its efforts to work closely together on WIOA implementation including common performance measures, and is working with its partners to use Workforce Connect as a consumer-facing and staff-facing dashboard and case management overlay to track shared consumers across the workforce system, among others. MRC participates in numerous workgroups such as the WIOA Steering Committee, WIOA Systems Integration Workgroup, and other committees who are working on the alignment of services under the workforce system.

The MRC Commissioner serves on the State Workforce Investment Board (SWIB), and each area director has a formal relationship with at least one career center. In addition, area directors or other MRC staff are on local workforce investment boards. MRC VR counseling staff make frequent visits and often conduct interviews at the local career centers and has leased space at all career centers to further increase MRC's presence. For example, MRC is also sharing space in the career center in Southbridge as a way to directly interact with the community as MRC serves a large number of consumers from Southbridge. MRC has finalized its MOUs and infrastructure funding agreements with local areas and the career centers. Finally, the MRC's job placement specialists and other assigned MRC staff work closely with local career centers to provide high quality vocational rehabilitation services to persons with disabilities seeking expanded employment opportunities and MRC is providing assistance to career centers so they can best meet the needs of individuals with disabilities.

15. Continue to further refine the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment process for WIOA requirements and reach out to additional consumers:

MRC continues to make changes and enhancements to the CSNA process and report to improve its quality on an annual basis in order to make it a more comprehensive and useful process for the agency, its consumers, its providers, and individuals with disabilities across Massachusetts. MRC uses a continuous quality improvement process with the CSNA process and is always seeking to improve the process so it best assesses the needs of its consumers and individuals with disabilities, including youth and students with disabilities. These enhancements were reviewed and supported by the SRC Needs Assessment Committee. MRC will continue to refine the CSNA process in collaboration with the SRC. MRC is planning on further collaborating with its WIOA partners and local schools to collect additional data for the CSNA in FY2019 and beyond.

16. Consider creation of a guide or list to assist in procuring products and materials from vendors:

In the Counselor Satisfaction Survey, some counselors indicated they would benefit from additional information about available vendors and the materials they supply. The contracts department has created master lists of vendors for some key contracts and placed them on a shared drive available to all staff. Additionally, training for staff on procurements and purchasing is planned, which may assist in this area.

Suggested Alternatives

1. Focus on improving communication between consumers and counselors, including developing strategies to improve communication on caseloads where staff vacancies occur:

Findings throughout the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment (CSNA) including the Consumer Needs Assessment Survey, Counselor Survey, Consumer Satisfaction Survey, suggest that some consumers may experience difficulties staying in contact with their counselor and vice versa with counselors having difficulty maintaining contact with VR consumers. This is also evident when looking at the closure reasons for consumers closed unsuccessfully from the VR program. It is recommended that MRC continue its workgroup of VR staff focusing on the reduction of Status 28 unsuccessful closures and expand the reach of this workgroup or establish a new workgroup to further review the area of communication and develop strategies to improve communication between counselors and consumers on their caseload. Staff training on remaining engaged with consumers is also recommended.

A focus on continued use of electronic methods of communication including email and text message may also assist in improving communication. Communication is a two-way street, and the results suggest a need for improvement in communication on both the counselor and consumer end.

It is also recommended that MRC should also look at ways to improve communication with consumers on caseloads where there are vacancies while they are being refilled, including having Unit Supervisors and Area Directors assist with communicating with consumers on these caseloads to ensure consumers remain engaged. Findings in the CSNA suggest this is an area where improvement is needed as well.

2. Continue efforts to enhance information to consumers and potential consumers on available services:

Based on the results of the Needs Assessment survey and focus group, it appears some consumers are not fully aware of some of the supports and services provided by the MRC, especially Community Living services. In addition, the findings of the Needs Assessment Survey, Consumer Satisfaction Survey, and the Counselor Satisfaction Survey all suggest some consumers do not fully understand what the MRC can and cannot do for them, and that some consumers may not completely understand

their role and participation in the VR process. The good news is that this theme has continually become less pronounced over the past several years in the CSNA suggesting that there is continued improvement in this area. MRC's updating of a basic service list which has been published to its website which had been recommended in previous CSNA's is a big accomplishment in this area. Despite these improvements, it is suggested that MRC should continue to address this finding. First, it is recommended that MRC update its Consumer Handbook and Orientation Video on an ongoing basis to make sure it remains up to date and accounts for any agency policy and procedural changes. Beyond this, MRC should continue to look at ways to provide more comprehensive information about services beyond its consumer orientation video(s), service lists, and consumer handbook, including training staff both on what other internal MRC services are available to consumers, and consider creating or obtaining an inventory, guide, or list of external resources and agencies the MRC counselors can refer consumers to. MRC can also continue to provide additional information on services through its marketing resources as well as through the use of social media and other methods.

There also appears to be some uncertainty on the part of consumers regarding self-employment assistance that MRC can provide. An update or revision of any documentation or handbook on self-employment services should be considered. These efforts should be beneficial to consumers.

3. Continue ongoing efforts to improve services to youth consumers including high school and post-secondary students with disabilities:

As transition-aged youth comprise a large portion of MRC VR referrals, and with the strong emphasis on serving youth and students with disabilities under WIOA, including pre-employment transition services, it is very important that the agency continue to focus on how to best serve these consumers, whose needs often differ from traditional adult VR cases. MRC should continue its efforts to expand and coordinate pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to students with disabilities, including potentially eligible consumers, through its Pre-ETS procurement with community-based providers and Independent Living Centers as well as the Transitional Internship Program (TIP), and other programs. MRC should continue its efforts to improve services to youths and students with disabilities through identifying and promoting best practices, continuing collaboration with local schools and community colleges, and ensuring that information on pre-employment transition services and the transition planning process is available to consumers and their families and to staff, MRC offices, and schools

through its WIOA Family Service contract and other efforts. MRC should also continue its staff training in this area. MRC is also updating transition brochures for students, families, schools, and other stakeholders. MRC should continue to participate in webinars and trainings on transition services, research strategies and models to continue to expand pre-employment transition services to students with disabilities, including potentially eligible students, and come up with strategies to refer additional youth consumers to the Statewide Employment Services office for supported employment services. MRC should continue to use its new Transition Pathway Services grant to seek out innovative best practices that can be replicated throughout the state in terms of Pre-ETS services.

4. Continue to develop pre-employment transition services for high school students with disabilities in coordination with local educational authorities:

It is recommended that MRC continue its efforts to develop and coordinate the delivery of pre-employment transition services (Pre-ETS) to students with disabilities (including potentially eligible students) with local educational authorities and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), including those services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). MRC has developed an agreement and is working with DESE to issue guidance to schools on the provision and coordination of individualized transition services for students with disabilities that lead to successful post-school outcomes in competitive integrated employment, post-secondary education and training, and community living.

5. Continue to expand services to employers and coordinate employer services with other core workforce partners:

MRC should continue to expand its efforts to provide services to employers through its account management system, employer advisory boards, the annual statewide hiring event, any local hiring events being planned, and other efforts designed to assess and meet the needs of employers and consumers alike. MRC also participates in a business strategy workgroup between key workforce partners as part of the Commonwealth's effort to coordinate services to employers amongst partner agencies. This effort will also assist with MRC's implementation of the WIOA Common Measure related to effectiveness of services to employers. It is also recommended MRC expand its pilot Employer Survey beyond its major employer accounts. MRC should also share the findings of the

CSNA with its employer advisory boards and employer relationships to assist employer partners in best serving the needs of individuals with disabilities.

6. Continue efforts to collaborate with other components of the Workforce Investment System in Massachusetts to serve the needs of individuals with disabilities:

The MRC should continue its efforts to collaborate with other core partners in the workforce investment system to reduce unemployment of individuals with disabilities and to provide effective services to employers throughout the state; to seek out collaborative opportunities including possible projects and grants that may assist individuals with disabilities across Massachusetts in obtaining competitive employment; and to continue to work closely together on WIOA implementation including common performance measures, and developing methods to track shared consumers across the workforce system, among others. MRC should continue its efforts through workgroups such as the WIOA Steering Committee, the WIOA Systems Integration Workgroup, and other committees to align services and continue to increase its presence at the career centers. MRC should also continue with its partners to complete the development of Workforce Connect as a consumer-facing and staff-facing dashboard and case management overlay to track shared consumers across the workforce system.

It is recommended that MRC continue to work in collaboration with other core partners under WIOA to survey and identify the needs of individuals working with other components of the Workforce system. MRC should expand and continue its efforts to consult with core partners on the identified needs of their consumers as it relates to accessibility and access to employment opportunities, employment training, and provide employer trainings on disability awareness and job accommodations. Additionally, MRC should work with its partners to collect additional data on the needs of individuals in the overall workforce system to further align services and complement and enhance the CSNA. MRC plans to speak to its workforce partners during FY2019 to see if we can begin these efforts by surveying the Career Centers.

7. Continue staff trainings and workforce planning efforts to assist in improving service delivery to VR consumers:

The CSNA has identified areas where additional MRC staff training may assist in improving the quality and effectiveness of VR services delivered to MRC consumers. Based on these findings, continued WIOA refresher trainings, trainings on pre-employment transition services (including those to potentially eligible consumers) and group transition services, job readiness/job placement activity trainings (resume writing, local job markets/labor market information, career assessments, etc.), ongoing trainings on the MRCIS case management system, counselor, supervisor and management trainings on VR best practices, policies and procedures, and effective practices for supervision, updated training on recording data such as measurable skills gains connected to WIOA common performance measures, and trainings on effective communication with consumers and time management are recommended. In addition, the agency should continue its efforts to create webinar trainings for staff on a variety of topics and continue to seek input from staff on areas where training can improve service delivery. It is also recommended MRC continue its successful workforce planning efforts to continue recruitment of new staff through VR counseling graduate programs and continue to provide ongoing manager, supervisor, and aspiring supervisor trainings and workshops to assist in preparing current staff for promotional opportunities within the agency.

8. Continue to improve collaboration with Independent Living Centers:

The Independent Living Centers (ILCs) remain important partners to MRC who can provide additional peer-driven supports to MRC consumers to assist them in their efforts to obtain employment and maintain independence in the community. Given that about only 30% of consumers are aware of the ILC in their area, the MRC should continue to improve referrals and collaboration between VR offices and the ILCs. In addition, MRC should consider efforts to increase consumer awareness of the ILCs, especially among individuals with psychological and cognitive disabilities. Given MRC is currently collaborating with several ILCs through the Transition Pathway Services grant and Kessler Foundation Career Pathway Services grant, and recently issued a new RFR for the VR/IL program, now is a good opportunity to increase communication and collaboration with the ILCs. MRC is operating a workgroup with the ILCs related to the new VR-IL contracts which should continue to be used to improve collaboration and developing new partnerships. In addition, MRC should also consider open houses, joint orientations, or other meetings and presentations in collaboration with the ILCs. Joint marketing efforts could also be considered. Collaborations such as the Transitional Internship Program, the Pre-ETS procurement, Career Pathway Service grant, and the

Transition Pathway Services grant, are good examples of beneficial collaborations with the ILCs, and MRC should continue to explore new possibilities for collaboration with the centers.

9. Continue to promote job driven trainings to increase employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities:

MRC has demonstrated over the past several years that job driven trainings and on-the-job (OJT) trainings are important and effective tools for training and employing consumers in competitive jobs in many industries and occupations. These are also effective tools to assist in eliminating stigma against consumers with disabilities by demonstrating the abilities and skills of individuals with disabilities directly to employers in their workplace. OJT and Job Driven Trainings were identified as important services by over 70% of consumers in the Needs Assessment survey and counselors have also identified the need for additional OJTs and Job-Driven Trainings. MRC should also continue to evaluate the outcomes of its Job Driven Training programs with CVS Health, Advance Auto Parts, Home Depot, Lowe's, The Kraft Group and other partners. MRC should continue its efforts to build off of these collaborations as a model to use with other companies to establish similar programs with the goal of increased employment outcomes for consumers and as a way to market the skills and abilities of individuals with disabilities to the private sector and to meet employer needs. MRC should also consider expansion of its hiring event to include additional employers and consider partnering with other core workforce partners to develop new employer partners for job-driven trainings, and consider development of regionalized hiring events and Job Driven trainings.

10. Continue to utilize findings to promote program development, assist with ongoing policy development and planning within the agency:

The findings and recommended alternatives from the CSNA should continue to be used by agency management for planning purposes and remain an integral part of its strategic planning and WIOA Combined State Plan efforts for short and long range resource planning activities and future program development activities. The CSNA has and should continue to be used to inform agency planning efforts relative to the implementation of WIOA and to drive future agency planning efforts.

11. Consider continuing the Donated Car Program beyond FY2019 based on available resources:

In this year's Needs Assessment survey, the Donated Car Program currently operated in partnership with Good News Garage was again one of the top transportation resource needs specified by consumers. As mentioned before, the program has been extended through FY2019. The program has been very successful over the past several years in assisting consumers in obtaining transportation to assist them with going to work based on an analysis of employment outcomes and a satisfaction survey. Consumers receive a donated vehicle that is repaired and inspected for safety and receive training on how to maintain and register a vehicle. Consumers must have the resources to register, insure, and maintain the vehicle.

12. Continue to increase consumer awareness of transportation options and explore efforts to assist consumers with transportation:

This year's Needs Assessment demonstrates that transportation remains a significant need for many MRC consumers. MRC should refine and update its transportation fact sheets on MRC's website as needed and incorporate these into trainings and informational materials based upon its research. There are a number of programs which may benefit consumers which can be incorporated into these materials. Development of other informational materials and training should be considered to assist consumers in learning about other available resources including local Councils on Aging and the EOHHS Human Service Transportation (HST) Office, and the MBTA pilot project with Uber and Lyft. In addition, MRC should continue to research collaboration with MassRides, MassMobility, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, Career Centers, the HST office, local and regional planning boards, and other organizations on projects or programs that might be able to assist consumers with transportation, given that transportation is a systemic issue requiring collaboration on multiple levels. MRC should also do a survey of its offices to find out more about how its local staff are connected to the local transportation regional coordinating councils.

It is recommended that MRC reach out to our contact at MassMobility to open a discussion on ideas to address the transportation issues facing MRC consumers and individuals with disabilities and how MRC can work with MassMobility and other agencies to address needs in this area. MRC should also request an update on the MBTA pilot project with Uber and Lyft as part of this effort.

13. Continue outreach to communities of ethnic and diverse backgrounds on vocational rehabilitation and other MRC service offerings, especially in the Asian community:

The MRC has made a commitment to reach out to individuals with the most significant disabilities who are also ethnic and cultural minorities through its Diversity Committee and through its Language Access Plan. The MRC should continue these outreach efforts to ethnic and cultural minorities, especially to the Asian community, which has been identified as slightly underserved by the VR program in Massachusetts. As growth in the Asian community continues to be seen in the state's general population, it is recommended that MRC continues its outreach efforts to Asian communities in particular. There was growth in the number of Asian consumers served by MRC during FY2018 but it still remains below the proportion in the overall state population. MRC will be conducting a focus group of Asian consumers in the Lowell office during Fall 2018. Information from this focus group and additional consultation with MRC's Diversity Committee may yield information and suggestions on additional steps MRC can take in this area to further engage with the Asian community and it is recommended MRC use the findings from this focus group to assist in developing strategies for outreach to this community. MRC should continue to focus on how to reach out effectively to these communities, including conducting outreach to local community agencies and organizations that serve ethnic and cultural minorities, among other methods. MRC should continue to consult its Bi-Lingual Committee for recommendations on how to reach out more to minority communities. MRC has been successfully increasing its numbers in terms of Hispanic community and best practices in this area may also assist with outreach to the Asian community.

The SRC Unserved/Underserved Committee should add reaching out to the Asian community to their agenda. Furthermore, it is recommended that the MRC's Diversity Committee, the SRC Needs Assessment Committee and Unserved/Underserved committee consider meeting jointly to come up with ideas for enhanced outreach to minority communities, including the Asian community.

14. Continue to further refine the Comprehensive Statewide Needs Assessment process for WIOA requirements and reach out to additional consumers:

The agency should continue its process of continuous improvement to the CSNA process with input from the SRC Needs Assessment Committee, and should continue to review RSA guidance, information from RSA Technical Assistance Centers such as WINTAC, and best practices from other

states as part of this process. The process of continuous improvement has been very beneficial and has led to a strong annual product that has resulted in actions being taken to address its recommendations and findings. Other states have also come to MRC to learn about our CSNA process. Consumer needs are a dynamic, a moving target, and as new policies and new priorities are established, consumer needs will continue to evolve. The CSNA has been enhanced and modified to assist with the implementation of new WIOA reporting, performance, and state planning requirements, and MRC should continue to refine the CSNA accordingly going forward. MRC should also continue to use the CSNA to inform further studies and analyses based on its findings.

Finally, it is recommended that the MRC continue to work with the Committee to discuss how to reach out to more consumers to identify their needs, especially in underserved populations. The Committee and MRC can build upon the results of the upcoming Lowell focus group to assist in this area. MRC should also consider researching ways the Needs Assessment Survey could be sent to consumers via text message in addition to email (to consumers who authorize MRC to send text messages). The translation of the Needs Assessment survey into Spanish and other languages should also be considered. Recommended refinements for the FY2019 process include efforts to collect data from WIOA core partners on the needs of their clients to develop a greater understanding of the needs of the overall workforce investment system as well as efforts to gather additional data from schools on transition services provided under IDEA beyond the transition survey conducted in FY2018.

15. Continue increase utilization of electronic resources to communicate with consumers:

Once again, a number of consumers recommended that MRC utilize more electronic methods to communicate with consumers, such as e-mails, text messages, social media, Skype, and other similar methods. Counselors also indicated they would like more tools to communicate with consumers including email to text messaging. It is recommended that MRC should continue to consider ways to increase electronic communication with consumers, including expanded use of text messaging. MRC has trained staff regarding email to text communication. Increased use of electronic communication may also improve consumer to counselor communication and may potentially assist in reducing the number of consumers closed out unsuccessfully because they cannot be located. A series of staff trainings on electronic communication should be considered. This will become more important in the future as consumers are more and more versed in communicating electronically and as MRC moves

towards a fully paperless VR case management system. The Workforce Connect dashboard which will include a consumer-end dashboard with secure messaging features may also be a tool which can have benefits in this area. Other states have used text messaging and online dashboards as communication tools and should researched as potential alternatives as well.

16. Continue to enhance methods and products to assist with job matching and providing additional job leads to consumers and counselors:

The MRC should continue its efforts to enhance efforts to match consumers' interests and skills with potential occupational areas and job opportunities. MRC has undertaken several efforts in this area including continued expansion of the ResuMate software system to allow staff to match consumer skills from resumes to required skills from job leads. Both MRC counselors and consumers expressed the desire for improved job matching and increased sharing of job leads that could lead to employment outcomes for consumers. The team model used in some offices where the JPS, ESS, and the counselor work together as a team to assist consumers in obtaining employment should be considered as a best-practice model that can be adopted across offices.

17. Continue to assist community rehabilitation programs:

It is recommended the MRC continue its efforts to assist and improve Community Rehabilitation Programs across Massachusetts. CSNA findings suggest that vendor capacity for MRC in its CIES and Pre-ETS procurements have assisted in meeting needs for CRP capacity to serve MRC consumers. However, it appears additional CRP capacity may be needed in some areas, both geographically and to serve specific populations. Recent rate increases to the Competitive Integrated Employment Service (CIES) procurement should assist CRP. MRC also is renewing the CIES procurement for FY2020 and has sought input from vendors, counselors, partner agencies, the SRC, and other key stakeholders as part of this process. MRC is also working with CRPs to provide pre-employment transition services to high school students with disabilities. MRC should continue its efforts to refine and evaluate its Pre-ETS procurement and continue to build in best practices for serving both eligible and potentially eligible consumers, based on outcomes and results in collaboration with providers.

It is also recommended that MRC continue efforts to improve communication and information flow between CRPs and MRC using a team communication approach with the provider, counselor, supervisor, and regional contract supervisor or other contract manager, and continue regular meetings and communication with the Providers Council and other provider trade groups.

18. Continue to focus on collecting valid email addresses for VR consumers:

MRC should continue its emphasis on the importance of collecting, recording, and maintaining valid email addresses in the MRCIS system. While the proportion of consumers with email addresses has increased significantly over the past five years, notable variations between some area offices in terms of the proportion of consumers in each office with an email address in the MRCIS system still exist. In addition, as job search processes have become more electronic, it is important that consumers have a valid and appropriate email address to apply for positions online and communicate with employers. A certain percentage of MRC consumers may not have an email address when they begin services. In these situations it is important for MRC counselors to assist the individual with setting up a free email account such as Gmail or Hotmail. It is also very likely that many consumers have active email accounts, but this information is not being recorded. MRC implemented an enhancement to the MRCIS case management system which allowed emailing of official letters and other correspondence from counselors to consumers, which has further increased the proportion of email addresses in MRCIS. Obtaining more email addresses will benefit consumers in improving their ability to find competitive employment as well as assisting counselors in maintaining regular contact with their consumers. This will also assist in improving quality of data stored in MRCIS, leading to improved communication with consumers and facilitating higher response rates to electronic surveys. It is recommended that MRC complete a refresher training for staff on email addresses and continue to emphasize the importance of recording addresses in relevant trainings and bulletins.

19. Consider creation of a guide or list to assist in procuring products and materials from vendors:

In the Counselor Satisfaction Survey, some counselors again indicated they would benefit from additional information about available vendors and the materials they supply. While the MRC has developed some lists of vendors for particular procurements, and is conducting trainings on procurement which should assist counselors with this and other concerns and issues in this area, development of a guide or list of resources to provide more information about available vendors for

purchasing items for consumers may be beneficial to staff. This guide would list available vendors and the particular products/materials that are provided by each vendor.

20. Attempt to increase the number of vendors for driver's education and training the next time the procurement is opened:

Over the past several years, the CSNA findings demonstrate a number of consumers who indicate they need driver's education services through survey results and open-ended responses. It is recommended that MRC should research the next time the Adaptive Driver Evaluation and Training Procurement will be opened for new vendors, and at that time should consider attempting to increase the number of qualified vendors under the RFR to assist with improving driver's education and adaptive evaluation services to consumers.

21. Conduct a study of how resource limitations impact service provision:

Given resource limitations on the VR program in general, conducting a study on how resource limitations impact service provision to consumers could be useful at this time. This study would assist MRC management to better monitor the quality of services during times of financial need and would be useful in making decisions on how best to serve consumers during challenging times.